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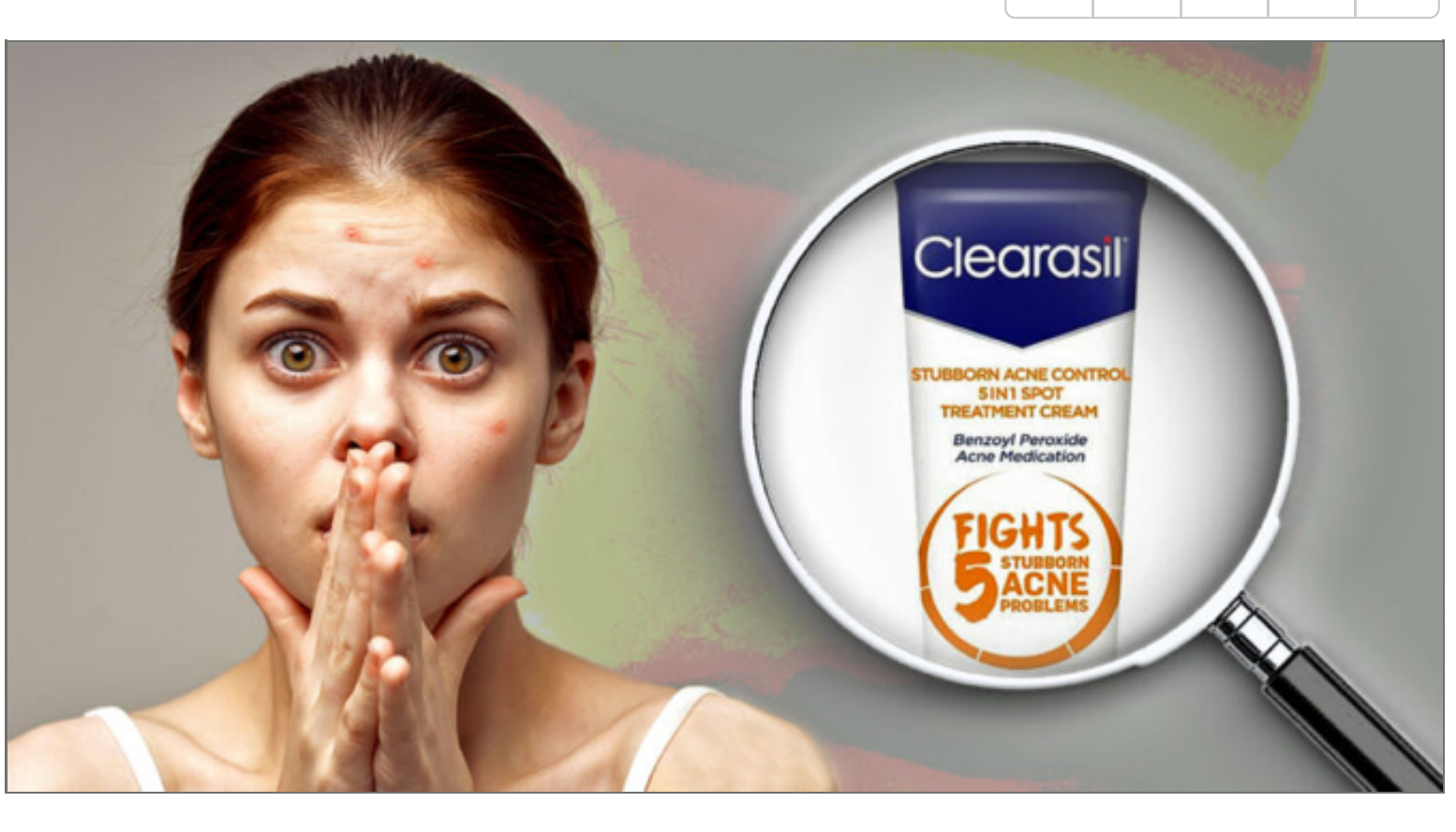
03/08/24 • BIG PHARMA › NEWS

Popular Acne Treatments Used by Millions of Teens Contain High Levels of Chemical Linked to Leukemia

An independent lab petitioned the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to recall popular prescription and over-the-counter acne treatments after testing showed the products contained "unacceptably high" levels of benzene, a chemical linked to cancer.

By **Brenda Baletti, Ph.D.**

21



Clearasil
STUBBORN ACNE CONTROL 5IN1 SPOT TREATMENT CREAM
Benzoyl Peroxide Acne Medication
FIGHTS 5 STUBBORN ACNE PROBLEMS

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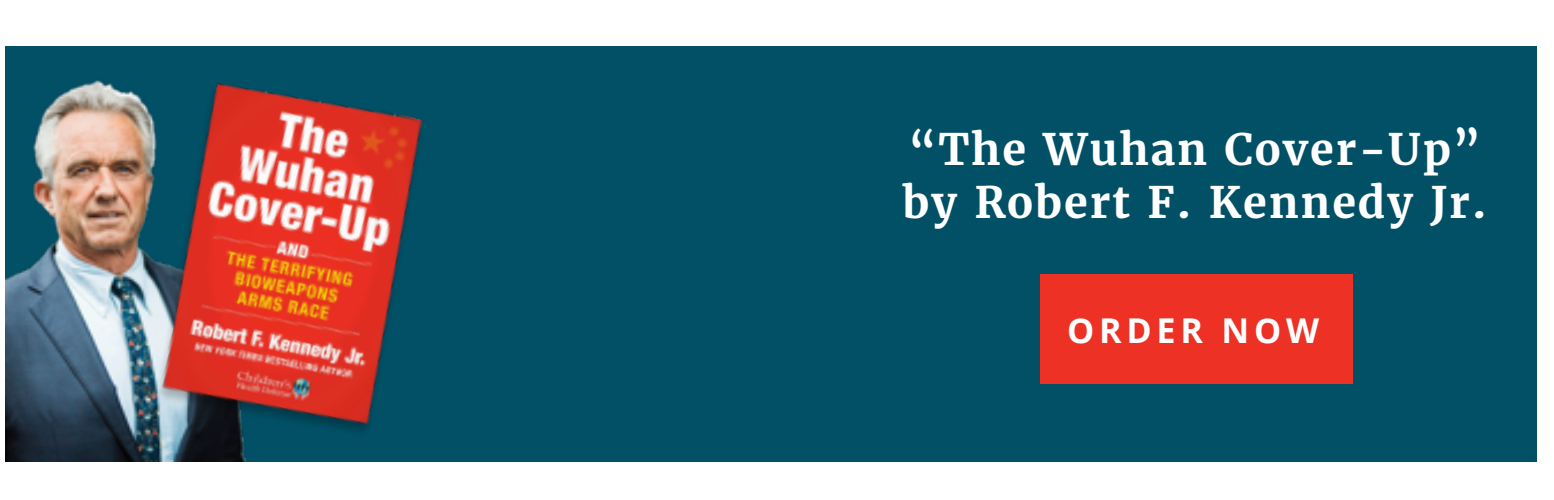
High levels of benzene, a chemical linked to cancer, can form in many popular acne treatments containing benzoyl peroxide, according to a new report by independent testing laboratory Valisure.

Valisure tested dozens of prescription and over-the-counter products, including popular brands Proactiv, Clinique, Clearasil and Target Corp.'s Up & Up, and found they can contain "unacceptably high" levels of the carcinogen.

Testing also revealed that benzene levels increase when the products are handled or stored at higher temperatures — such as left in a hot car or stored in a steamy bathroom.

The lab filed a Citizen Petition with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), sharing the results of its analysis and asking the FDA to recall the products and suspend their sales while regulators investigate the issue further.

Acne is one of the most common skin conditions in the U.S., affecting up to 50 million people per year in the U.S. Approximately 85% of adolescents experience the condition at some point.



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Bloomberg reported that sales of over-the-counter U.S. acne treatments totaled $1 billion last year.

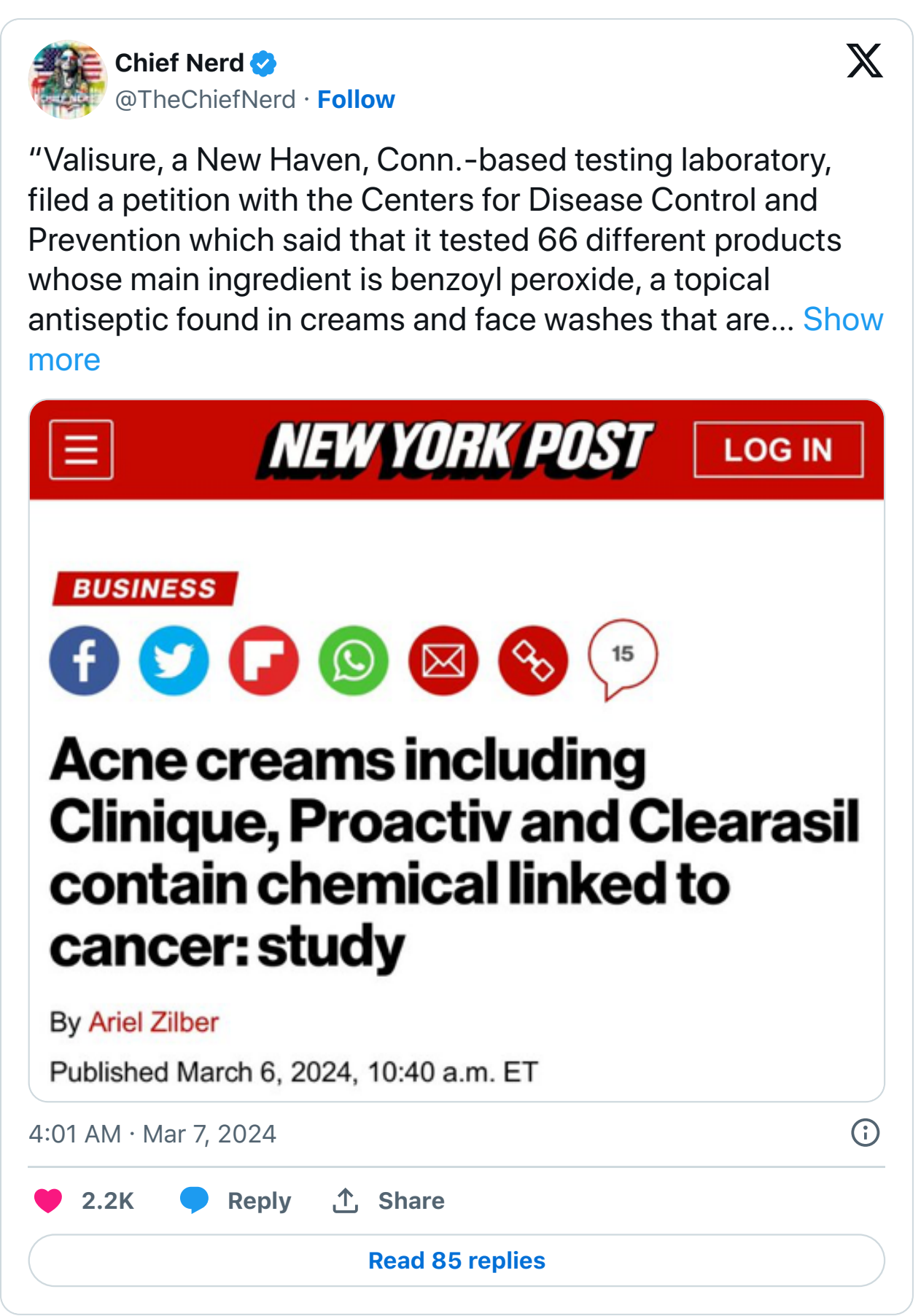
Acne medications containing benzoyl peroxide, which breaks down into benzene, are commonly recommended by dermatologists and health websites as an easily accessible over-the-counter treatment.

The American Academy of Dermatology guidelines strongly recommend benzoyl peroxide for treating acne topically.

Benzene, long known to be carcinogenic, is a popular chemical solvent commonly used in chemical and pharmaceutical industries and found in trace amounts in substances ranging from cleaning products to cigarette smoke and gasoline. It evaporates quickly, so much human exposure can come from the air.

According to the World Health Organization, "there's no safe level" of exposure to benzene in the air we breathe.

Breathing or otherwise absorbing benzene over time can lead to leukemia and other blood disorders, according to the FDA.



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"Valisure, a New Haven, Conn.-based testing laboratory, filed a petition with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention which said that it tested 66 different products whose main ingredient is benzoyl peroxide, a topical antiseptic found in creams and face washes that are... Show more

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Acne creams including Clinique, Proactiv and Clearasil contain chemical linked to cancer: study

By Ariel Zilber

Published March 6, 2024, 10:40 a.m. ET

4:01 AM · Mar 7, 2024

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Over the last several years Valisure also identified high levels of benzene in sunscreen, hand sanitizers and other consumer products, leading the FDA to alert drug manufacturers and recommend against the use of benzene in pharmaceutical products.

Health Canada recalled some sunscreens. Companies including Johnson & Johnson, Unilever and Procter & Gamble Co. have also recalled aerosol sunscreens, antiperspirants and dry shampoos.

While those products contained high levels of benzene because of impurities from contaminated ingredients, Valisure President David Light said in a statement, "The benzene in benzoyl peroxide products is coming from the benzoyl peroxide itself, sometimes at hundreds of times the conditional FDA limit."

"This means the problem broadly affects benzoyl peroxide products, both prescription and over-the-counter, and necessitates urgent action," he added.

Valisure tested 66 benzoyl peroxide products, including creams, lotions, gels, washes, liquids and bars.

FDA guidelines allow up to two parts per million of benzene. Several of the products tested showed benzene levels well above two parts per million. Those levels jumped to tens or hundreds of times the allowable level when products were tested at higher temperatures designed to replicate the conditions in which they might be transported or stored.

Christopher Bunick, M.D., Ph.D., associate professor of dermatology at the Yale University School of Medicine and physician-scientist at Yale Dermatology, told The Defender that benzoyl peroxide is susceptible to free radicals or oxidants, which cause it to break down into different chemicals, including benzene when exposed to heat.

Among products with the highest benzene levels was Proactiv's 2.5% benzoyl peroxide cream, manufactured by Taro Pharmaceuticals, which contained 1,761 parts per million of benzene.

Target's Up & Up 2.5% benzoyl cream had 1,598 parts per million; Estee Lauder's Clinique 2.5% benzoyl peroxide cream had 401 parts per million; Reckitt Benckiser Group's Clearasil 10% benzoyl peroxide cream had 308 parts per million, and Walgreens 10% benzoyl peroxide cream had 114 parts per million.

The lab also found high levels of benzene in La Roche-Posay's benzoyl peroxide cream, Sandra Lee's benzoyl peroxide lotion, Neutrogena's benzoyl peroxide gel, CeraVe's benzoyl peroxide cream and many others.

The researchers also tested for benzene in the air surrounding the products and found that even an unopened Proactiv product leaked high levels of benzene when kept at 104 degrees Fahrenheit for just under 17 hours.

This shows that benzene "can leak out of some product packages and pose a potential inhalation risk," the company wrote.

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"Valisure's findings are significant for the skincare industry," Bunick said, citing several reasons:

> "First, manufacturers must maintain certain quality and safety standards as mandated by the FDA. Current benzoyl peroxide products do not meet that standard, especially with regards to stability over time and temperature.
>
> "Second, … benzene is a well-established carcinogen in the same highest danger category as asbestos, lead and formaldehyde.
>
> "Third, it is less clear to fully comprehend the health implications of benzene exposure, because the cancer-causing effect may take decades to manifest. It is a similar scenario to sun exposure, where sunburns in one's youth potentially lead to skin cancers in adulthood, sometimes 20-40 years after exposure.
>
> "Lastly, a new report out of the U.K. showed that low-level benzene exposure (at levels below 1 part per million, which is less than what is seen in many benzoyl peroxide products) increased risk of all-cause mortality, cardiovascular disease and multiple cancers, including hematologic and lung."

Valisure also tested products containing other ingredients, such as salicylic acid or adapalene. Those products had benzene levels that were either undetectable or below the FDA's current limit of 2 parts per million, the lab reported in its Citizen Petition. Only the products containing benzoyl peroxide contained high levels of benzene.

The FDA, Estée Lauder and Reckitt did not immediately respond to The Defender's request for comment.

An FDA spokesperson confirmed in a statement Wednesday and reported by CNN that the agency had received the petition and would respond.

"Such data must be verified as accurate and reproducible before it can be utilized to make regulatory decisions such as recommending product sale suspensions and recalls," the statement said.

Valisure's Light has a patent application pending on formulations and techniques to reduce the rate of benzyne formation from benzoyl peroxide breakdown, Bloomberg reported, although the patents have not yet been granted.

The lab is also known for its investigation into Zantac, which the FDA pulled from the market in 2020 after the lab notified the agency that the drug's key ingredient, ranitidine, could expose people to a carcinogenic substance called N-Nitrosodimethylamine. Another lab, Emery Pharma, confirmed the findings. Both labs submitted Citizen Petitions demanding recall.

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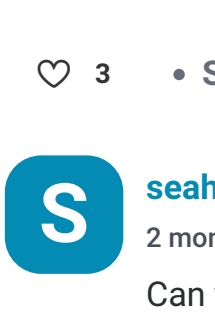

Brenda Baletti, Ph.D.

Brenda Baletti, Ph.D., is a senior reporter for The Defender. She wrote and taught about capitalism and politics for 10 years in the writing program at Duke University. She holds a Ph.D. in human geography from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a master's from the University of Texas at Austin.

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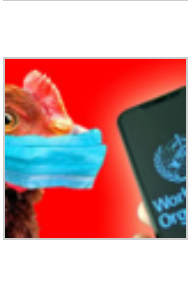

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seahawk
2 months ago
Can you trust big pharma or other labs to do anything right? Proceed at your own risk.
6 0 Reply

> **Kim from Brooklyn** → seahawk
> 2 months ago
> Just say NO!
> 3 0 Reply

rvrdncr
2 months ago
Positively SHOCKING that something the FDA Approved has been found to be damaging to health! They all should be shackled and dragged thru the hell they have caused in this country! No Mercy!
5 0 Reply

> **Kim from Brooklyn** → rvrdncr
> 2 months ago
> Big pharma is the most corrupt system yet.
> 3 0 Reply

BarbaraCharis
2 months ago
Over 80,000 chemicals in our food, personal care items, clothing, furniture, carpet, etc. Trying to keep up with the latest chemical attack is not easy. The only way...is to not spend on poison. Simplify your life and get healthy. If a product has a long list of chemicals...avoid. If one has a health problem...ask yourself: What am I doing wrong? In the case of acne. it is the wrong foods 95% of the time. It is far healthier and cheaper to eliminate the problem foods...and stick to healthier unprocessed foods that have no unnecessary ingredients. There is no drug that doesn't have a more dangerous side effect. A simple aspirin contributes to macular degeneration and intestinal bleeding.
4 0 Reply

> **Kim from Brooklyn** → BarbaraCharis
> 2 months ago
> We are pretty much doomed for sure. But we still have good semblance of what we choose to do or not do, with the life that we are given. We don't have to be screwed 100% of the time.....99% maybe....:) sheesh.
> 0 0 Reply

Liz it Is
2 months ago
Zinc clears up acne, consumed in ration with other minerals. Maximum Living's Mineral Rich Liquid supplement is a good source on zinc and B-12.
3 0 Reply

Little O
2 months ago edited
An ideal FIRST way to prevent and/or address acne IS to stop eating after sundown. See Dr. Satchin Panda (Salk Inst.) interviews by DR. RHonda Patrick about 7 years ago (Youtube). When she asked Panda a hypothetical, he said "Sadly it is BETTER to eat an UNHEALTHY meal during the day because eating later in the EVENING turns even NUTRITIOUS food into JUNK (inflammation is caused ALL through the night)." How is this possible? Later eating, which includes eating meat within 4 to 6 hours of sundown, causes "excess circulating glucose (ECG)" and ECG CAUSES the inflammation first to the one cell thin endothelial lining of all blood vessels. DO you think that might contribute to acne if not cause it. Reason: As the sun sets the body starts to produce melatonin and the pancreas notices the melatonin and begins to shut down the mechanism for producing/releasing insulin - WHICH IS THE MANAGER of ECG. And what happens to sugar in a warm and wet environment....ferments. Try this once for a day or a week and see what happens. An obese man did this for a year and lost 1/3 of his body weight but confessed "I was still eating my favorite food..... DONUTS" Re-read Panda's words above again -unhealthy donut DURING the day is BETTER than ANY late eating. It's NOT healthy but no inflammation from ECG. A 20 year Type II diabetic I know, tried this, and noticed in the first week how his AM glucose was in a steady consistent downward trend. THAT was different so he was motivated. After four weeks, his glucose was normal. Four weeks OF NO INFLAMMATION being produced all through the night. Thus one can heal. As Hippocrates wrote 2,000+ years ago: 'If you are sick and still eating YOU are feeding your illness. Stop eating and you will heal." They knew experientially over 2,000 years ago the link between illness and eating. The historian Josephus also reported that "People in the 1st C.E. AD Roman culture ate one meal a day around noon." The Benedictine monks ate one meal around 3PM.
3 0 Reply

> **Kim from Brooklyn** → Little O
> 2 months ago edited
> Good points. Fasting 72 hours every month can cure so much as well
> 1 0 Reply
>
> > **Beatrice** → Kim from Brooklyn
> > a month ago
> > Fasting is great!!! I fast once a week and it's had a dramatic effect on my overall eating habits. I don't crave anything, feel more energetic, less stressed, sleep better and eat much less. I watched a really good video by Dr. Chattergee with a doctor guest on fasting. Very interesting.
> > 0 0 Reply

Melissa Meow O'Donnell
2 months ago
Castor oil works great on acne.
2 0 Reply

BChristine
2 months ago
ACNE originates in the gut and has everything to do with diet and the necessary nutrients. To use carcinogenic products 'designed' to counter this affliction (despite whether it takes care of the symptoms or not), only intensifies a negative outcome long-term.

The absolute best thing that can be done is to evaluate the diet for food sensitivity (an elimination diet if necessary); and making sure it is organic, non-GMO, and whole-food based.
3 1 Reply

> **Isthisthingon** → BChristine
> 2 months ago
> One's Microbiome both gut and skin are at play here. Acne is caused by Fungal Bacteria from my understanding and everything in our world these days is an assault on the Microbiome! , as you know.
>
> Birthing babies with depleted and toxic microbiomes as well as having a C section and/or having antibiotics administered while birthing can deplete the Microbiome even further for both Mama and Baby! Along with the protocol in Hospitals to take the baby from the womb and be handled by anyone other than the Mama where the skin bacteria of other people spreads all over the baby isn't good-which too much skin bacteria envelopes a C section baby as they emerge from the skin-the way to mitigate this is to have a sponge inside of the Mama's V and use it to wipe down the baby as it emerges from the skin. This hospital where they create super bugs by constantly using harsh chemicals to supposedly sterilize the environment is a potentially hazardous place for a newborn...so, many factors at play here, but totally agree cleaning up the diet and honoring good sleep hygiene, good hydration and liver cleansing as well as intermittent fasting and replenishing the Microbiome with SBO, etc. is key!
>
> see more
> 4 0 Reply
>
> > **Kim from Brooklyn** → Isthisthingon
> > 2 months ago
> > Amen to that. We survived a few hundred years!! A miracle in itself considering how determined humans remain to destroy their kind. Stupid is forever.
> > 2 0 Reply
>
> **Isthisthingon** → BChristine
> a month ago
> Not sure why, Elwood here, would be down voting this post, seriously, I'm pretty sure all Pharmaceuticals destroy the Gut Microbiome! And that Real Food is Thy Medicine!
>
> Remember, the Industrial Medicine won't tell you what the Appendix is for as if they did, all things that harm our Microbiomes would have to cease to exist! The Appendix is a reservoir for our Good Gut Bugs, which we are hosted 10-1 with both Viruses and Bacteria, which replenishes our guts with these good bugs after a bout of sickness. The rub lies in not being born with the Right Good Bugs!
>
> I should have included in my post down below that one's outer skin essentially shows what one's inner skin looks like...the mucosal lining from your mouth to your exit is your inner skin...people who suffer from Leaky Gut, SIBO/SIFO-small intestinal Bacterial or Fungal overgrowth as well as IBS/IBD and I'm convinced with Chrones and Celiac and C Dif (which with the last three all need a fecal transplant from a healthy doner-but this is only allowed with C Dif as it kills you faster than the other two) as well as Acne, all are in need of Real Help in Healing their Microbiomes! Which starts with Intermittent Fasting, elimination of harmful
>
> see more
> 2 0 Reply
>
> **Kim from Brooklyn** → BChristine
> 2 months ago
> Antibiotics will destroy your skin organ quicker then you can swat a fly off your burger!
> 0 0 Reply

Gary Brown
a month ago
Mar 6, 2024 Chemical Linked to Cancer Found in Acne Creams, Testing Lab Says

Acne products from brands including Proactiv, Target Corp.'s Up & Up and Clinique have elevated levels of the carcinogen benzene, an independent testing laboratory said in a petition filed with the US Food and Drug Administration late Tuesday. The lab says all the products should be recalled.
1 0 Reply

Beatrice
a month ago
Remember Acutane for acne? It caused serious side effects on the skin, brain and mental disorders. I remember a man stealing a plane and crashing it and blaming it on the drug. I had a customer whose daughter was taking it and when I voiced concern she said that it was fine but they needed to get liver value tests on a regular basis. I said, ' You mean to determine when the drug is causing liver failure?"

Acne isn't a disease that warrants the need for toxic pharma drugs. As many below have pointed out, there are much safer alternatives that also provide benefits overall.
1 0 Reply

Elwood Bernat
a month ago
Here's a clue for all the kids and adults with pimples. Try washing your face more often then use a mild greaseless lotion that won't block in the bacteria in the pores but washed away on the next washing. Your pimples will disappear while you grow up and take responsibility for the face you want to love by removing the opportunity of facial bacteria invading pores. As for those who move past puberty (a lost word in marketing expensive topical junk) and still have acne, investigate dietary (biome) changes. Or you can continue to be marketed to continue the malaise with more snake oil to treat the snake bite.
1 0 Reply

Seabreezes1
a month ago
It's been decades, but I preferred a little hydrogen peroxide or rubbing alcohol on a cotton ball to Clearasil whose only benefit was its flesh color masking component. Didn't like sunscreens, much, either. Both acne medicines and sunscreen made me itchy.

Rule of thumb: *Trust your body instead of the pharmaceutical advertisements.*
0 0 Reply

jann
a month ago
Another source of benzene is in many cleaning products, even those used in schools. Something else for parents to look into.
0 0 Reply

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